

Jewish and Muslim Communities Share 20 Year Interfaith Relationship

At a time when we seem to be bombarded by one negative message after another, it's reassuring to know that there is a lot of good going on in Silicon Valley between the Muslim and Jewish communities. While it is sometimes easier to follow the loudest noise, it is those who are making their voices heard in a different way that should command our attention. These are the voices that speak with sincerity and integrity to consistently promote social justice, understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

Diane Fisher, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, recently sat down to speak with Rabbi Melanie Aron, senior rabbi of Congregation Shir Hadash, and Maha Elgenaidi, executive director and founder of ING (Islamic Networks Group). These three women combined have more than 60 years of experience working to bring interfaith people together in a common cause. For the past 20 years, they have focused on building the groundwork for Muslim-Jewish relations in the Bay Area.

Here is their interview.

Diane: Working on interfaith relations is not new to either of you. What was the driving force behind your passion in this area?

Maha: I started ING 25 years ago to increase Islamic literacy through the engagement of Muslim Americans in Silicon Valley. After 9-11, Islamophobia was pervasive, and it became clear to me that the focus of ING needed to broaden to combat bigotry and racism through interfaith engagement. The local Jewish community immediately embraced the idea. In truth, working with the Jewish community came naturally because there is actually quite a lot we share in common including our Abrahamic traditions. I always felt like I had real partners that were genuinely interested in working together.

Melanie: Early in my career I was working in Brooklyn, where I was in the minority as a woman and a non-Orthodox rabbi. I became a liaison between our African-American neighbors and the Orthodox community, whose relationship was often tense. It was important for the African-American clergy to see that the Orthodox rabbis weren't shaking my hand either. Soon I was sitting on panels with other interfaith groups, including Muslims. I found that the Muslims and I saw things in much the same way. We shared a strong sense of peoplehood and of midrash (commentaries along with the text) that this became a commonality that connected us. It was natural segue for me to continue to build interfaith relationships when I took over the rabbinate in Los Gatos 30 years ago.

Melanie: I remember you inviting me to join you and others at the Muslim Community Center right after 9-11. We all wore hijab and stood together in solidarity.

Maha: That was initiated by two Catholic nuns with whom I had previously worked. They were concerned about Muslim women being afraid to wear their hijab in an environment that had become so hate-filled. But you were one of the rabbis that was at the forefront of genuine concern for our Muslim

community. So, I invited you to join us. It was amazing. There were hundreds of people who showed up to support the Muslim community, close to 500, I believe.

Diane: What are some areas of commonality between Jews and Muslims?

Melanie: Both communities have practices that engage our daily lives. Following the rules of halal and kashrut, for example, are symbols of deeper religious practices we both observe in our homes. There are parallels in our scripture as well. Even when the stories in the Bible and Qur'an are different, it is enriching to study together. For me, it's the idea that we have an evolving halacha, while Muslims have an evolving Islamic law.

Maha: Exactly. Islamic law is *fiqh* in Arabic, which means deep understanding. It is derived from the Qur'an, which Muslims believe is the word of G-d, Hadith, which comprises authenticated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, the consensus of scholars, analogical reasoning and the emerging Muslim religious practices over the past 1400 years. So, it's constantly changing and evolving based on location and circumstances. I also want to add for readers that Islamic law is often mistranslated as Sharia. Sharia refers to the divine guidance found in our scriptures and includes ritual practices as well as principles and values such as the freedom of religion, gender equity, peaceful relations with our near and distant neighbors, and the sanctity of human life.

Melanie: The scripture doesn't change. But over time as we have new questions, it's how we apply the teachings of the scripture and draw from religious scholars to better understand and consider contemporary issues.

Diane: And that is not commonly understood. When we have done our interfaith seders, our discussions have illuminated what we have in common and how our teachings have evolved over time. Many people who attended the seders were astonished to learn these things.

Melanie: Every year we used to do this twinning through the Foundation on Ethnic Understanding. One year, in response to an article in the New York Times about the difficulty of doing business as a Muslim, we put together a panel of six observant Muslim and Jewish businessmen in technology. They talked about how they tried to apply the ethical teachings of their religion to their work. They found that it was struggle, as the laws are not voiced in 21st century language and the parallels for contemporary business situations are not found. But their shared discussion was very meaningful as was their shared ethics.

Maha: I think what motivates Muslims the most in working with the Jewish community is that Jews believe in the same G-d of Abraham. This belief helps tremendously in terms of being immediately understood when we have conversations on religion. We also share many practices, traditions and values as we are two of the largest religious minorities that are faced with ongoing bigotry.

Melanie: A recent congregant celebrating her adult bat mitzvah shared what it was like for her growing up in Sri Lanka. She attended a Catholic school as did several Muslim children. She always felt closer to the Muslims, whose faith seemed more like hers. When she would recite the Sh'ma, the Hebrew prayer that says, "Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad – Hear o' Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One," her Muslim friends would recite a similar prayer.

Maha: Probably the shahada, which is the Islamic testimony that "there is no god but G-d, and that Muhammad is the messenger of G-d." In Arabic it is recited as follows: "la ilaha, illa'llah, Muhammad rasul Allah." It is the statement of faith for Muslims, recited with intent and sincerity. It is whispered in the ear of a newborn child and in the ear of a dying person.

Diane: Can you comment on the trajectory of relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities in Silicon Valley.

Maha: At one time, Muslim-Jewish relations were basically defined by where you stood on Palestinians and Israelis. You were only friends if you were on the same side of the issue. After 9/11, a Jewish man in Fremont organized the city council there to take a stand against Islamophobia. We were so touched by his actions that we honored him at one of our annual events. It caught the eye of the local JCRCs, who brought us in to thank us and to ask what else could we do together. We brainstormed ideas and filled a white board with all the things we could be talking about besides what's happening in the Middle East. Combating anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, maintaining our religious identities in a secular environment, and keeping our families safe with respect to events and policies that are beyond our control were common priorities. And this is exactly the kinds of issues we work on together.

Diane: Are there specific programs that have come from this?

Maha: The Interfaith Speakers Bureau, which is currently in its 11th year and very popular, is one program. My organization (ING) puts together panels of interfaith speakers and travel to schools, universities, rotary clubs, churches and other houses of worship to address many of these topics.

Working with the Jewish Community, Diane and the JCRC, we started a program called Halaqa-Seder, which we host with Jewish communities near the time of Passover. During the seder, we read each other's Scriptures on the Exodus Story, which in one of the most often told stories in the Qur'an. We re-enact parts of that story through dramatic plays or readings and break bread (matzah!) together. It's become one of the most successful programs between Muslims and Jews in the Bay Area.

We also support each other by attending important events – Many Muslims in our community attend Holocaust memorial services, private and community seders; and many Jews attend Ramadan Open Houses at mosques and private *iftar* (breaking of the fast) dinners. Jewish and Muslim day schools have jointly hosted ongoing events and enjoy learning from one another. There isn't a mosque in Silicon Valley that doesn't have a relationship with a local synagogue. It's really wonderful to see the progress and growth of Jewish-Muslim relations since before 9/11.

Diane: How can you disagree on important issues and still move the conversation forward and work together effectively?

Melanie: Getting to know each other personally as individuals is critical. Sitting face-to-face across the table from one another, engaging in a cooking class, holding interfaith seders, sharing tips and concerns about our children. It's activities like these that build bonds and help us overcome our differences.

Maha: For Muslims to be a force of influence, we first have to become known and understood, and then respected for who we really are. Focusing our engagement on the many things we share in common is important to building a sustainable, supportive relationship. The reality is that in authentic relationships, people will disagree all the time. But if you remain focused on your shared goals – in our case, it's building peaceful communities – then you'll find a way to remain in a relationship despite those disagreements.

Melanie: Fighting racism is something we also both share. I think we both feel that when prejudice is the move overt in the U.S., it comes at us both at the same time. It's one of the reasons our Jewish Family Service and HIAS joined with the JFS of Seattle to sue the government over the Muslim ban. Our JFS had Muslim clients they were trying to bring to the U.S. They had already left their home when the ruling came into effect and subsequently became abandoned in an airport somewhere. The ban also touched a sensitive chord in our community. Even the most apolitical Jews could relate because of our history of being refugees and having no one open the door for us.

Maha: It was even surprising to me how outspoken the Jewish community was against the Muslim travel ban. When we saw the statements made by the JCRC, the Federations, the ADL we were so thankful and grateful to have this allyship.

Melanie: Recently JFS had two Muslim clients from Afghanistan. A member of our congregation has taken them in, providing shelter and food. I think they may have even been a little surprised at how much they all enjoy each other's company. The Muslim community provides support for them as well. This is a great example of how we can work together for a common cause.

Diane: Xenophobia affects both the Jewish and Muslim communities. Along with the commonalities are distinct experiences as well. Can you address these?

Maha: It's clear to us that this administration is absolutely targeting Muslims and Islam in general. The statements from Republican candidates during the election process and now from our current President support this. And it opens the door to others to freely express their racist viewpoints.

The most troubling impact of xenophobia is the Muslim ban, which is now sanctioned by the Supreme Court. In doing so, it dismissed the Islamophobic comments the president made throughout his candidacy and now his presidency. The concern is that it could expand from the current five nations to other Muslim nations as well, impacting Muslim travel.

In addition, my husband is from Pakistan and I was born in Egypt; we are both naturalized citizens. We worry, are we going to remain citizens if the federal government chooses to revoke citizenship of some of its naturalized immigrants?

Government officials have also called for the racial profiling of Muslims, surveillance of our Mosques and Muslim registries. We are in a very precarious position in the U.S. I honestly feel that our strongest allies are Jewish communities. Their history of persecution parallels what is happening in the U.S. today.

Melanie: There is also a difference between anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Anti-Semitism is often this hidden, but consistent undercurrent that can pop-out in different ways. People may not fully appreciate how White Nationalists are inherently anti-Semitic, for example. When our community bands together to support each other, the effects of bigotry and prejudice can become mitigated.

Diane: In fact, when the APJCC in received the bomb threat last year, one of the first calls we got was from the Evergreen Mosque.

Melanie: After that bomb threat, when we had to evacuate the entire building, including our preschool and the Jewish Day school, people began to feel a very real psychological pain. Seeing Jewish children evacuated, touched a nerve that brought back painful historical memories.

Maha: I especially appreciated the Muslim response to the desecrated Jewish cemeteries across the country. There was a national effort to help clean-up that involved hundreds of Muslims. I think they set a goal of raising \$25,000 and so many people donated, they ended up raising more \$100,000.

Melanie: We are all connected. What happens to one, really affects us all. The Muslim and Jewish communities are close mirrors of each other in many ways. The other thing we are learning is that while some Muslims are Arabs, many come from Southeast Asia, bringing a different perspective to the Israeli situation, further facilitating conversation.

Maha: That's a good point. Interestingly Palestine is not central to the identity of many Muslims as Israel might be to Jews. I really think it would be of benefit to Muslims to learn more about the significance of Israel to Jews, not necessarily for acceptance but for understanding. As long as Jerusalem is open to all for pilgrimage, we should be able to find a compromise that works for Palestinians and Jews primarily as well as for Muslims and Christians around the world.

Diane: What can we do to build on the work that has already been done to encourage people to be more respectful and tolerant?

Maha: I think we need to do a better job of publicizing the work that is taking place between the Muslim and Jewish communities to bring light to it.

Melanie: This is not a quick solution - we need to continue and in fact, increase, face-to-face dialogue. We can often better grapple with differing opinions in a much different and more personal way when we sit across the table from someone rather than communicating online.

Maha: Thinking in black and white will destroy us. Those that proselytize and expect an “all or nothing” following of their viewpoints make it difficult to come to compromise and understanding. And I absolutely agree we need many more face-to-face and heartfelt conversations.

Melanie: We need to really listen to each other both within and outside our communities. Listening doesn’t mean you agree...it simply means that you are listening.

Diane: That’s what we try to do with the JCRC. We try to find consensus within our own community before we work with others outside of it.

Maha: What is important is that we continue to educate both the Jewish and Muslim communities so that we can build a sustainable relationship where together we can learn, pray, talk and just enjoy what we have in common with each other.

Melanie: I also think that the relationships we have worked so hard to build over the last 20 years are very precious to both communities. And we don’t want hot-button issues that we may not be altogether ready to discuss to damage the relationship in any way or to hijack other important work we want to accomplish together.

Maha: Each Muslim-Jewish relationship is going to be different. Some may bond more over their children and families or on how to assimilate without losing our religion and culture. For those in business, networking and issues at work may become their common bond. We shouldn’t expect that every Jewish-Muslim relationship is going to focus on a political issue. But when it does, we need to make sure it’s civil and constructive, so we can continue to meet. The truth is that, even in politics, we have much more in common than we do differences.

Melanie: From experience, what I think we have all found is that when you take the time to genuinely know someone, the differences become far less significant and the steps toward a shared understanding become so much easier to take.

If you are interested in joining the Muslim-Jewish dialogue and participating in shared events, contact: Diane Fisher at diane@jvalley.org. More information can also be found at:

ING: www.ing.org

JCRC: www.jalley.org/jcrc

Shir Hadash: www.shirhadash.org